



## Providing homes for all Australians

A response from Catholic Social Services Victoria to the Australian Government Green Paper *Which Way Home? A new approach to Homelessness*

Denis Fitzgerald  
Executive Director

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### **1. Introduction**

#### ***1.1. Catholic Social Services Victoria – focus on homelessness***

Catholic Social Services Victoria is a peak body for Catholic social service agencies in Victoria. Our members deliver a wide range of social services across the State. A list of our member agencies is attached to this submission. We work with member agencies, as part of the Catholic Church in Victoria, to fulfil the gospel imperatives to stand with and serve the poor, disadvantaged and marginalised, and to work for a just, equitable and compassionate society.

Homelessness is a key issue for CSSV, and is a major focus for the work of many of the Catholic social service agencies in Victoria.

This work includes such services as preventative work with families at risk of homelessness; crisis accommodation and other support for women, families and men; domiciliary nursing care for unwell homeless people, accommodation for young released prisoners, and other transitional accommodation; and the provision of long term housing for older people who have emerged from homelessness. Equally as important are the case management and support programs that help build the skills and relationships, and build links to services, that are a necessary part of transitioning out of homelessness.

The importance and the reach of this issue is also reflected in our research output over recent years, which includes work on the needs of older homeless people; and the interaction of homelessness with release from imprisonment and with poverty.

#### ***1.2. Catholic Social Teaching – the centrality of homelessness as an issue***

Our policy analysis, and our response to marginalisation and disadvantage, builds on the principles of Catholic social teaching. These are based on gospel values and the collective reflection and experience over time of the application of those values in working with the poor, the disadvantaged and the marginalised. Our members continue in this tradition in applying these principles to contemporary issues.



Homelessness is an affront to the principles that underpin our commitment to a just and compassionate society.

At the most general level, respect for the dignity of each person demands that we work to enable access for all to safe, secure and sustainable housing - unless a person can access this, then it is much harder for them to achieve the other elements that we associate with wellbeing: education, employment, health, freedom from violence, and strong family ties and relationships generally. (Contrariwise: if these elements of wellbeing are absent, then homelessness seems to be more likely to result.)

Further, the promotion of the common good of our society is in the interests of all: no one section can truly flourish if other sections of society are unable to achieve their human potential. Homelessness on the scale that persists in Australia is evidence that we have not yet achieved a fair balance.

Our members therefore warmly welcomed the Prime Minister's and Government's focus on tackling homelessness: as the Prime Minister described this focus when launching the Green Paper in Adelaide on 22 May 2008: to *'finding a new approach to preventing homelessness where possible, and where prevention fails, then [t] breaking the cycle of homelessness'*. We welcome the priority given to the development of the Green Paper, and to the consultation process surrounding it. And we look forward to an emerging policy that is stronger, more comprehensive and better funded as a result of the consultation process.

### **1.3. This submission**

The response to the Green Paper from Catholic social service agencies is multi-faceted: because of the centrality of this issue to their work, a number of agencies are preparing their own submissions; and many have contributed ideas and experience to the consultation forums, and to the submissions of various peak agencies. Catholic Social Services Australia, our national body, is also focused on the consultation.

This submission complements those other inputs in representing and giving a voice to the reflection of a range of member agencies on the steps needed to meet the needs of the homeless in Australia.

The submission does not set out a comprehensive framework the wide range of homelessness and related services that are needed to make the large, sustainable impact on homelessness that the Government is aiming at, and which the situation requires. Rather, it sets out a number of points of emphasis and priority that our experience indicates are necessary parts of the outcome we are aiming at. Most of these points are identified in the Green Paper itself. The main difference is the emphasis that is given to them.

## **2. General points**

### **2.1. Funding**

Significantly more public funds will be needed to provide the range of housing and support services that are needed to make a significant impact on homelessness. An



adequate Government policy would recognise that as a starting point, and would exercise leadership in registering this point with the Australian public.

As the Green Paper emphasises, contributions from all sectors of society are also needed - from business, the unions, community organisations, and from the families and individuals that make up society as a whole - but these essential contributions do not remove the imperative that additional financial resources are needed for housing stock, preventative services, targeted support services, and long term solutions. Because of the centrality of the issue of homelessness to the wellbeing of our fellow Australians and of our society, funding for these activities must be a priority claim on public resources.

At the same time, it is essential to realise that funding alone, or the provision of services that do not lead to genuine belonging, will only rarely have lasting impact. It is indeed the whole community that needs to respond, because it is only within the structures of that community that the relationship elements of 'a home' can be built. But this essential point must not obscure the need for very significant increases in public funding, on many fronts.

## **2.2. *Housing availability***

As with adequate funding of programs, the provision of physical accommodation is not itself a sufficient or an effective response to homelessness. It is, however, an essential element in such a response.

It is abundantly clear that housing stock is inadequate in Victoria. This general shortage is a major factor in the increased cost of rental, which is itself currently a direct cause of entry into homelessness. The supply of affordable housing is particularly inadequate: from crisis and short-term housing, through to affordable long term accommodation options. This stymies many of the pathways out of homelessness.

The provision of adequate housing for Australians is a key public policy issue today. It is an issue that Governments at all levels have recognised, but it is not yet apparent that we as a society are on track to solve the major problem that exists. Until this happens, all other measures to prevent and alleviate homelessness will be impaired, and their success limited. We urge Governments at all levels to address housing availability with the urgency that it requires.

## **2.3. *Policy principles***

The Green Paper sets out policy principles underlying its approach. These are largely supported as far as they go – for example, we endorse the principle set out in the Green Paper, that a response to homelessness from the whole community is needed. However, the Green Paper could be read as giving inadequate recognition to the amount of public funding that will also be needed to make the sort of difference that is needed.

Another principle can be added: that programs that work should be supported, as should, where appropriate, their expansion and replication. No one argues that we have all the answers, and many programs will over time be absorbed into or replaced



by broader endeavours. Nevertheless, a basic principle is that programs that work should be built on.

Closely related to this is the need for acknowledgement of diversity and complexity. When we see a program or an approach that works, that should be considered as part of the broader solution; and the emergence of local solutions should not be hampered by the search at Government level for comprehensive fixes.

### **3. Prevention**

#### **3.1. *The bigger picture***

It is well established that the trauma and suffering associated with homelessness is best addressed by preventing entry into homelessness in the first place. And, as the Green Paper notes, preventing the entry into homelessness must be a central focus in the effort to drastically reduce homelessness in Australia.

Nor are the broad causes of homelessness unknown: family violence, family breakdown, drug and alcohol abuse, mental health problems are identified in many accounts of the causes. And underlying these elements it is common to find unemployment, imprisonment, ill health, low levels of education and of income. The coalescing of multiple levels of disadvantage that is a feature of a number of locations in Australia<sup>1</sup> adds to the complexity of the situation.

Addressing these issues is the broad challenge of building a better society. It is the role of effective macro-economic management, fair and effective income systems; accessible and effective education, health and social support systems; and of a society where family cohesion is the norm, and there is a prevailing sense of solidarity, shared responsibility and cooperation within families and local communities.

That human nature prevents the realisation of these outcomes does not absolve us as a society from working towards them. The unacceptable alternative is to abandon whole sections of our society, and concentrate on the well being of those who are better placed.

#### **3.2. *Transition points***

While working in the real world towards such outcomes, we also need to focus on addressing the more proximate causes of homelessness: on identifying people at risk and taking action to support them so that they can avoid falling into homelessness. Appropriate support at critical transition points in peoples lives and circumstances has been shown to be effective.

Release from prison is such a time. The Brosnan Centre, a service of Jesuit Social Services, which provides short-term accommodation and complementary support to young people who are released from gaol, is such a service. The recently announced provision of some funding from the Tasmanian Government to the St Vincent de Paul

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Vinson, *Dropping off the Edge – the distribution of disadvantage in Australia*, Jesuit Social Services/Catholic Social Services Australia, 2007



Society to provide accommodation and outreach support for parolees is addresses a related need.

Release from hospital is another such time: the provision by St Vincents Health of domiciliary nursing care for unwell homeless people at Sister Francesca Healy Cottage in Fitzroy is a program whose success is documented<sup>2</sup>, and has been identified as an element in a comprehensive way forward in meeting the homelessness challenge.

Programs such as these are almost invariably underfunded, and reliant on donations and cross-subsidisation to keep them operating. Funding is thus a key issue. Moreover, while we urge the broad promotion of programs such as these to others with the initiative and commitment required to implement them, a necessary corequisite is, again, the provision of additional public funding.

Children leaving care are another particularly vulnerable group. The Green Paper's account of the incidence of homelessness among this group (p 28) is harrowing, and an indictment of current arrangements. Our agencies identify that the need for young people to transition into real relationships, into a community of care, is overwhelming, but it is so difficult to achieve. As in many other areas, funding alone cannot solve this issue, but it is a necessary input.

#### **4. Crisis support and pathways out**

##### **4.1. Accommodation**

Agencies that offer crisis accommodation turn away large numbers of people every night – single men, single women, children, and families. As we work to reduce the need for short-notice crisis accommodation, we need as a society to provide it for those who have no alternative. Funding is required.

There are also a wide range of special needs. A number of our members offer accommodation for women and families who are fleeing from domestic violence. Their assessment is that there is insufficient accommodation for these groups. A part of the response to the needs of this group, and in combination with the broader project to remove the causal factors at play, additional funding for crisis and transitional accommodation is needed.

##### **4.2. Services and social support**

Drop-in centres, the provision of medical, dental and other services, skills development, meals, clothing, etc: the provision of such services to the homeless is driven by the respect due to the human dignity of those that are marginalised, and the importance to the long term wellbeing of the homeless of building a web of supportive human relationships. Many of our members provide such services. They identify such services as among the many facilities that would be largely lost to the homeless if mainstream service providers were expected to absorb the care of the homeless within their programs.

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<sup>2</sup> Georgina Phillips 'A 'Reformed' Mainstream Health Service: A Model for the Future', pp 31, 32 in *Parity*, June 2008



Other members and other programs reach out to those on the streets and in sub-standard or short term accommodation. Their observations, based on discussions over extended periods of time with homeless clients can be acute: the prevalence of mental illness; the multiple case managers that one person can have, each for a different service; the challenge of accessing mainstream services that are so readily accessible to their non-homeless compatriots.

They also reflect on the dire shortage of services that are effectively not available. The experience of the Australian Bureau of Statistics and its international counterparts corroborates these observations: that a major effort is required to involve the homeless in functions that are built around a paradigm of mainstream social participation. Thus, mental health services, etc, will not be utilised unless they seek out those that need their care.

### **4.3. Case management and pathways out**

Using the heading of ‘social inclusion’ one of the principles proposed by the Green Paper is that ‘Homelessness is more than shelter and support. The focus must be on building human capacity to maximise everyone’s potential for social and economic participation’. So far, so good. But the potential for social participation needs to be activated if the state of homelessness is to be transcended.

The ‘Journey to Social Inclusion’ program at Sacred Heart Mission in St Kilda builds on their experience, their survey work and broader research, to work to end the cycle of homelessness for adults who are entrenched in homelessness, and socially excluded.<sup>3</sup> This 3-year service model has as key components intensive personal support over the period; therapeutic intervention, building up and developing skills, and linkages into existing services. Approximately half the funding needed for a three year trial has been obtained to date. Such programs are necessarily long term, and thus expensive: as a senior worker at Sacred Heart Mission pointed out in *The Age* newspaper recently, ‘if you’ve been homeless for five years, your’re unlikely to solve the problem in five days, or five months...’<sup>4</sup>

Recognition of the benefits of case management, and of integrated, or holistic, service provision is also presented as a governing principle in facilitating long-term emergence from homelessness. Bethlehem Community - catering for a small number of homeless and ageing women - is another member that has demonstrated the impact of such approaches. But these approaches are not cheap. They are more expensive than standard aged residential care, because they have the added dimensions of managing the social dimension of post-homeless transition. Mental health issues, development of social skills, including the accessing of the usual range of community services, and the location of safe, affordable and secure housing, are best tackled as a package, not as separate needs.

At the same time, ‘red tape’ is a burden. ‘Joined up services’ are needed, but without the multiple accountabilities and reporting requirements that are currently

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Perusco ‘A journey to social inclusion: ending the cycle of homelessness’, pp 4, 5 in *Micah*, April 2008

<sup>4</sup> Chris Middendorp ‘When a house is not a home’, *The Age*, 24 May 2008



experienced. The laudable desire for efficiencies by coordinating and funding agencies also needs to be subordinate to the need to react to local diversity. Longer duration of funding models, and the acceptance of more age-specific options is, in Victoria, a priority.

Another dimension of needed flexibility relates to the entry of new members into what is the primary community for residents. Community cannot be manufactured at a desired rate – it is a fragile development, that needs constant nurturing, and its viability can be threatened if a funding body determines that a spare bed must be allocated to specific people, without regard for the effect on the whole of the community.

## **5. Building longer term community**

Many of the issues faced in the provision of transition accommodation and support are evident in the building of long term solutions, but there are also additional elements to be addressed.

The emergence from homelessness is a long term process, dependent on the availability of safe, affordable and adequate housing, and on the ability of the person to establish the web of personal and service relationships that sustain participation in the community. Our case workers recognise this, but funding models often do not. Greater flexibility is needed.

A number of our members provide special facilities that foster a community environment, for particularly vulnerable groups. These people have special needs: mainstream aged care funding is not adequate to meet the costs of the range of services that some of our clients need. There are partnerships between mainstream aged care providers and homelessness services to make available services that recognise the particular sensitivities and vulnerabilities; and these include a focus on building acceptance by the local community.

Public education is another theme that emerges from discussion with the homeless, and with those who work with them. Transition to a sense of acceptance by society requires that the other members are accepting, that they recognise the problems that people encounter, and that they make allowances for them. One worker noted that many of us are less likely to smile when we walk past a homeless person than we are in other cases. Such attitudes are not conducive to the spirit of social inclusion that is needed to achieve long term change.

### **Attachment: List of CSSV Members**



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Bethlehem Community  
Catholic Chaplains Association for Health Care  
Catholic Solo Parents  
Centacare Ballarat  
Centacare Bendigo  
Centacare Catholic Family Services  
Centacare Gippsland  
Corazon  
Corpus Christi Community  
Early Education Program for Hearing Impaired Children  
Good Shepherd Aged Services  
Good Shepherd Youth & Family Services  
Jesuit Social Services  
John Pierce Centre for Deaf Ministry  
Justice Unit, Archdiocese of Melbourne  
Kewn Kreestha - Rest Home for Mothers  
Larmenier  
MacKillop Family Services  
Marillac House  
Mercy Health and Aged Care  
Nazareth House  
Project Dreaming Tracks  
Regina Coeli Community  
Sacred Heart Mission  
Sisters of Charity Care Ltd  
Society of St Vincent de Paul  
Southern Cross Care (Vic)  
St Mary's House of Welcome  
St Vincent's Health  
Villa Maria Society